

2012

Family Matters

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Family Matters

Documentation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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December, 2012

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Artist Statement

Art has taught me to treasure family history. Since childhood, I have loved looking through my grandparents' memorabilia, especially old family photos and my grandmother's jewelry box. I have always admired my grandparents and recognized their unique gifts and artistic talents. I keep their memories, stories, and sayings alive through my artwork.

My symbolic work consists of illuminated sculptural pieces as well as intimate jewelry designs. I work in precious metal clay (PMC), glass, sterling silver, crystals, precious stones, and photographs to create personal and unique reminders of people and places. Through my work, I want to inspire others to appreciate their own family histories. I want my audience to realize we need to love, appreciate, and accept one another for who we are and cherish the moments we have together. I want others to recognize the legacy we all leave behind.

Family Matters

Introduction

I can remember attending an art opening at Vizcaya Museums and Gardens in Miami, Florida when I was about twelve years old. Attending the opening reception raised my awareness of art at a young age. For the first time, I saw how art connected people and I was inspired to expand my own horizons and increase others' awareness and appreciation of art.

I tinkered with tools in the garage with my dad, took wood shop classes in high school, and created tree houses with friends in the neighborhood. I made any homework look like a work of art, whether it was a delicately decorated cover of a report or a wildly transformed poster for a project, it was the process I enjoyed. The collecting, gathering, and arranging of the items were the thrill and excitement, not the assignments.

While attending college I experimented with many media. I worked with everything I could get my hands on. I had my first exposure to jewelry making at this time, and I was also introduced to stained glass. Once again, the tools and the methods engaged me to the point that I would spend all night in the art building and didn't even want to sleep. I felt like a sponge absorbing all these different processes, yet I wasn't sure who I was or where my art was going. One thing I knew without question was that I was passionate about many diverse media and I enjoyed working with others. My father suggested that I pursue a career teaching art. I thought it was a great idea, and thus began my art education curriculum. I did my student teaching, earned my Bachelor of Science degree in Art Education, and began my teaching career.

Later, during a jewelry class for recertification, I began to rediscover the thrill of creating my own art once again. I found that I had become so involved in teaching that I neglected my

creative passion. It was then that I turned to the Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art (MIS-IAR) Program, offered through Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU), to revisit my previous experimentation and collecting. I chose the focus areas of mixed media and jewelry (crafts).

Aesthetics

Send an idiot to Harvard and you get a polished idiot, this was something my grandfather said on many occasions. I have always been fascinated and amused by the quirky idioms, euphemisms, and clichés my family has used over the years. Since these sayings did not have literal interpretations, I would always mix them up and say things, such as *Well that's the kettle calling the pot black*. My family started to call them *Heatherisms*. I can remember being with family and everyone laughing hysterically all the time. It wasn't until I started to hear other adults repeat these sayings that I was genuinely intrigued and began to find the humor in them myself. I realized that these figures of speech have been used for generations. I wanted to share their wit and the memories I associated with these sayings.

I started to create mixed media sculptures to represent and incorporate many of these clichés. For instance, in some sculptural pieces I embed and hide various sayings that the viewer needs to find. In these sculptures, I write sayings such as *were you born in a barn?* Or *you reap what you sow*. I write these euphemisms on Plexiglas and handmade paper. Then, I incorporate these pieces of paper and Plexiglas into the structure of the sculpture. These works are interactive and require the viewer to swivel and slide out a riveted piece of cardboard and Plexiglas disc (covered with handmade paper) in order to read the text. I have also used lights to literally illuminate these sculptures or to symbolically illuminate a personality.

In my two-dimensional work I use family photographs. I realized that as I looked at the photos I thought about the many sayings. Both the photographs and the sayings reminded me of the love, humor, and admiration I had for my family. In these works, I transferred photos and sayings onto handmade paper and Plexiglas. I want my viewers to recall things said within their own unique families. I duplicated, arranged, and manipulated these photos in a variety of ways to emphasize the person or the memory. I am very proud that my grandfather was one of the first commercial pilots as well as a pilot for the plane used in the first hijacking. Therefore, in some pieces I have used coordinate maps that only pilots use to reference the technical aspects of flying and the complicated situations my grandfather found himself in. I am also completely in awe of my talented grandmother who was a dancer, singer, seamstress, and mother of twelve children, six of whom passed away at birth. To create commemorative pieces in her honor, I used photographs of her in various stages of her life. I want these images to evoke feelings of familiarity and nostalgia in the viewer, even though they have never seen this woman before. The photos that I use are typically from the 1930's.

In my jewelry work, I use a similar inspiration in creating each piece. I incorporate photographs, fingerprints, and historical elements to commemorate the people in my life. I make these pieces to highlight the connection between my family and myself as well as to invoke a love of the past. I hope that my work allows the viewers to remember and examine their own history.

Influences

Through the years I have studied and learned about a variety of artists, many who I have admired and some who have had a great impact on my artwork. One artist who has especially

inspired me is Louise Nevelson (1899-1988). I was intrigued by the collections of carved wooden objects in her pieces. I wondered where all the elements of her sculptures were from and how she decided to arrange them. I learned that she found the individual parts of her sculptures in the streets of New York. I was inspired to develop my artwork in a simple yet similar fashion. In her work, Nevelson compartmentalized memorabilia of divergent types in puzzle-like fashion. I developed a similar method of organization in my orderly placement of objects and in my juxtaposition of unique and often unexpected elements, such as copper pipes and Christmas lights. However, unlike Nevelson I collected items of historical significance to me that I found in my grandparents' home in Florida and hardware I have collected over time.

I also have a fascination with Pop artist Andy Warhol (1928-1987). I admire his use of vibrant colors and his bold artistic expression. He often made unusual or unexpected choices for subjects, such as images of celebrities or mass-produced consumer products. For example, he created portraits of actress Marilyn Monroe and he turned a Campbell's soup can into an international icon. Also, so many of his sayings remind me of familiar euphemisms, such as "Art is what you can get away with" or "I think everybody should like everybody" (Warhol, 54). It appears that he didn't worry about what people thought of him nor was he afraid to create what he wanted. Much like Warhol, I believe that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, what may be common to one viewer is a masterpiece to another. In response to some of Warhol's ideas, I created a work that contained nine self-portraits on nine canvases. Like his *Marilyn Diptych* (1962) I used a vibrant color palette and a simple repeated image. However, unlike Warhol, I further manipulated the imagery and components. His sense of pattern and color have inspired my unique style of blocking with the Plexiglas. In this approach, I used small images as component parts of a larger image.

Robert Rauschenberg (1925-2008) is another artist who has piqued my interest. In his *Stoned Moon Series* (1969) of lithographs, he combined photo transfers, diagrams, and NASA images to create a collage. His use of divergent images and media in one piece is an approach I have incorporated into my process. His piece, *Sky Garden* (1969), is a silkscreened painting of a rocket. It is composed of interwoven colored sections overlaid with painted areas and draftsman-like labeling for the parts of the rocket. Like Rauschenberg, I also use a variety of media and techniques to create mixed media works. Some of my works include maps etched into Plexiglas or placing maps below the Plexiglas surface and scratching into it with a dremel tool. Rauschenberg's technical innovation and interweaving of photographic images has had a defining impact on my work.

Nevelson, Warhol, and Rauschenberg have all contributed ideas to my work through their use of mixed media, composition, and subject matter. Like Nevelson, I have compartmentalized elements in works, I have repeated images in the manner that Warhol did, and used mixed media techniques as inspired by Rauschenberg. Being inspired by these particular artists and the variety it has brought to my work, has allowed me to experiment in ways that are unique and unusual.

Mixed Media

During my coursework, I experimented with making a variety of colored papers. I experimented with different papers and applied watercolors, acrylics, and inks to see how these pigments would adhere to and affect each paper type. I ended up with a large stack of hand-made papers. I wanted to find a way to use all of the papers I had made. I started cutting 4" squares of heavy pressed cardboard and covered each of these in multi-colored pieces of hand-painted

papers. Once I had about twenty boards covered, I envisioned making a sculptural book.

Having small children myself, I wanted all aged viewers to be able to relate to my book. So, I used clichés a mother would often say to her child. I made a book that looked like a miniature tower or building. It represented the power and strength a mother must have to raise a child. It consisted of a multitude of boards, springs, beads, and lighting components.

In my book, *Tower of Love* (Appendix, 1 and 1a), I chose to use knitting needles to support the structure. They reminded me of my grandmother who taught me to knit. I designed the tower to be an interactive playful piece. I began collecting retractable ink pens and removed all the spring pieces inside. I used the springs, supported by washers, to divide each layer of boards. On each square board, I placed a smaller square that slides out. On each of these smaller squares, I wrote a saying to represent what a mother may say, such as *Someday when you have kids you'll understand* or *Don't pick your nose*. At the top of the structure, I wired a lighting system into holes and added grommets to safely hold miniature bulbs in place. The lights bring an additional playfulness to the piece. In this piece, I told a story of being a mother, loving a mother, learning from a mother, and remembering a mother.

After creating the work *Tower of Love*, I began to recall all the humorous clichés the rest of my family used to use. I already had a variety of paper, so I began to cut 6" circles out of cardboard. As I began to cover each piece in the colorful paper, the structure began to form in my mind. For *Heatherism's* (Appendix, 2 and 2a), I cut Plexiglas circles the same size as the cardboard circles and I wrote clichés onto these Plexiglas circles. Then, I cut out an additional 1" circle from inside the Plexiglas, leaving one word out of the cliché. I wrote that missing word onto the paper-covered cardboard piece. So, when the two pieces fit together the entire saying can be read. When they are split a part, the meaning is partially lost or obscured. This adds a

level of mystery and adds a playful interactive factor. I used copper pipe and large washers to divide the circles from each other. I created three towers intersecting one another. Each disc and copper pipe had to be carefully placed in order to overlap the cardboard and the Plexiglas while fully extended. I made this piece in memory of my grandfather who used more euphemisms than anyone I have ever met.

In my next piece, *Becky* (Appendix, 3), I used nine individual pieces of canvas covered with nine individual pieces of Plexiglas. I began by transferring a sketch of myself onto each of the nine canvases. I then selected a variety of colors and carefully calculated the color placement for each of the nine images. Then, I carefully transferred one large image of my grandmother onto the nine pieces of cut Plexiglas. Finally, I added a letter I wrote to my daughter replicating a letter written from my grandmother to my mother. This piece symbolized the generations of love and admiration for our children.

Wanting to explore a unique way to use Plexiglas, I created the piece *Stage Lights* (Appendix, 4). I used a frame that had seven deep boxes in it, and hand crafted a sliding system to allow the panels of Plexiglas to glide over one another to reveal the contents that I created in each of the seven boxes. I also measured and drilled holes around the perimeter of the frame to allow me to add a lighting system to create the effect of a lighted mirror you would see in a backstage dressing area. I manipulated and enlarged an image of my grandmother to transfer onto the seven Plexiglas panels, along with a letter my grandmother had written to my mother. Each box represents a time or memory of my grandmother, for example one of the boxes (Appendix, 4a) has an assortment of sewing paraphernalia, which we would always rummage through as children.

Jewelry

Just prior to enrolling into the MIS-IAR Program, I took a jewelry class offered by VCU. I was interested in learning a new media. I quickly realized how fascinated I was with PMC (precious metal clay). With this new media, I created jewelry in a variety of metals and learned some important skills of working with jewelry. Once enrolled in the MIS-IAR Program, I chose to also focus on jewelry. I was able to concentrate on the design and composition while practicing my newly acquired skills of burnishing and polishing the metals.

Family Jewels (Appendix, 5) is a charm bracelet consisting of glass beads, silver beads, crystals, and miniature framed photos of my family. I created a few textured beads from PMC and delicately wired an array of flat beads embellished with crystals and spacer beads. Later, after returning to the assortment of pieces, I assembled them all together with the photos to create a treasure that could have anyone's special photos inserted into the frames.

Lavender Mist (Appendix, 6) is a wide band ring showcasing a large amethyst crystal. The stone is my mother's, sister's, and grandfather's birthstone. Once I selected a color of significance, I realized the design would have more sparkle if given a window from behind. So, I carefully wrapped the outer edge of the stone with PMC and calculated the distance needed to create a ring band. After carefully measuring the finished wrapped stone, I precisely crafted the remaining band needed, in order to not block the backside of the stone. Once fully crafted in PMC, I calculated the temperature needed in order to fire the clay and not melt my stone. Once removed from the kiln, it was rinsed and burnished to a shiny patina. This sleek, simple ring represents the large personality my family brings with them wherever they may be.

Maria (Appendix, 7 and 7a) is a necklace I created which focuses on a fingerprint. To make this piece I pressed my finger into a ball of PMC. I then fired the clay at a specific

temperature to insure the print stayed strong and defined. Once removed from the kiln, I drilled a hole into the piece and stamped my initial on the back, and assembled the toggle and clasp to the chain. Making these fingerprint pendants is a way for me to recognize my family and their unique characteristics.

I display and photograph my jewelry on twigs of trees. I see these branches as a symbol of my family tree. I like the natural element it brings to the piece itself, in addition to the complicated and unique branches symbolizing the complication each family tree must have. It also adds the uniqueness somewhat like the fingerprint itself. Every one of them is completely different.

Conclusion

While working through obstacles I never thought that I could overcome, I have learned about who I am as an artist and the direction I am drawn to in the arts. The MIS-IAR Program has allowed me to develop and improve my skills, and has encouraged me to continue growing as an artist. I am more confident in my skills and experimentation, and therefore more confident in my art. I have also come to realize the passion I have for my family and how they are woven into every aspect of my being. It is with great honor that I bring the history of their talents to my artistic table.

As an art teacher for Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS) for seventeen years, I have learned quite a bit from the administration, students themselves, and additionally from the growth of the art department every year. However, after entering the MIS-IAR Program I have also fostered creative skills in my classes at school. I am better able to analyze, critique, reflect, question, and evaluate my own teaching through the skills I have learned. I have been able to

develop curriculum for classes that I may not have been able to do without the support from the instructors in this program. I know myself better and know what direction I want to head in the future. I feel this program has allowed me to open doors I didn't even know existed. I am very thankful for the opportunities that my many professors have given me to encourage this type of learning.

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Appendix

List of images

- Figure 1. *Tower of Love*, mixed media, 14"x4.5"x4.5", 2008.
- Figure 1a. *Tower of Love*, (extended view), mixed media, 14"x4.5"x4.5", 2008.
- Figure 2. *Heatherism's*, mixed media, 50"x16"x16", 2011.
- Figure 2a. *Heatherism's*, (extended view), mixed media, 50"x16"x16", 2011.
- Figure 3. *Becky*, mixed media acrylic on canvas, 30"x24"x1", 2011.
- Figure 4. *Stage Lights*, mixed media, 38"x32"x7", 2012.
- Figure 4a. *Stage Lights*, (detail), mixed media, 38"x32"x7", 2012.
- Figure 5. *Family Jewels*, PMC, silver, crystals, bracelet length 7.5", 2010.
- Figure 6. *Lavender Mist*, PMC and crystal, size 8, 1"x.75"x.25", 2010.
- Figure 7. *Maria*, (pendant detail), PMC, silver and crystals, necklace length 18", 2010.
- Figure 7a. *Maria*, PMC, silver and crystals, necklace length 18", 2010.



Figure 1. *Tower of Love*, mixed media, 14"x4.5"x4.5", 2008.



Figure 2. *Heatherism's*, mixed media, 50"x16"x16", 2011.



Figure 2a. *Heatherism's*, (extended view), mixed media, 50"x16"x16", 2011.



Figure 3. *Becky*, mixed media acrylic on canvas, 30"x24"x1", 2011.



Figure 4. *Stage Lights*, mixed media, 38"x32"x7", 2012



Figure 4a. *Stage Lights*, (detail), mixed media, 38"x32"x7", 2012.



Figure 5. *Family Jewels*, PMC, silver, crystals, bracelet length 7.5", 2010.



Figure 6. *Lavender Mist*, PMC and crystal, size 8, 1"x.75"x.25", 2010.



Figure 7. *Maria*, (pendant detail), PMC, silver and crystals, necklace length 18", 2010.



Figure 7a. *Maria*, PMC, silver and crystals, necklace length 18", 2010.

Heather Leigh Warstler

Education:

- 2012 Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia. Emphasis in Mixed Media and Jewelry (crafts)
- 1993 Bachelor of Science in Art Education, Longwood College, Farmville, Virginia

Teaching Licensure:

- 1993-2013 Commonwealth of Virginia, State Board of Education, State Teacher License

Teaching Experience:

- 2005-Present Art Teacher, Sunrise Valley Elementary School, Reston, Virginia
- 2003-2005 Art Teacher, Floris Elementary School, and Hutchison Elementary School, Herndon, Virginia
- 2002-2003 Art Teacher, Hutchison Elementary School, and Drainesville Elementary School, Herndon, Virginia
- 2001-2002 Art Teacher, Hutchison Elementary School, and Buzz Aldrin Elementary, School, Reston, Virginia
- 2000-2001 Art Teacher, Hutchison Elementary School, and McNair Elementary School, Herndon, Virginia
- 1995-1999 Art Teacher, Hunters Woods Elementary School, Reston, Virginia

Related Experience:

- 2012 Mentor Teacher, Sunrise Valley Elementary School, Reston, Virginia
- 2010 Mentor Teacher, Sunrise Valley Elementary School, Reston, Virginia
- 2009 Judge, *Reflections Art Contest*, Langston Hughes Middle School, Reston, Virginia
- 1999 Judge, *Reflections Art Contest*, Sunrise Valley Elementary School, Reston, Virginia
- 1997 Mentored student from The Enterprise School, Vienna, Virginia
- 1997 Facilitated and Created art with students for CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocates) at Hunters Woods Elementary School, Reston, Virginia
- 1997 Presenter, Engaging Parents in the Arts at Home, Freddie Mac, McLean, Virginia
- 1996 Created partnership with Kennedy Center for the Arts, Washington, DC, and Hunters Woods Elementary School, Reston, Virginia
- 1996 Creator, Hands-on Museum with 3rd grade students at Hunters Woods Elementary School, Reston, Virginia
- 1995 Instructed and created a 40' mural with all 1100 students on wall at Hunters Woods Elementary School, Reston, Virginia
- 1994 Created artwork to support "Help the Homeless" campaign, Student Loan Marketing Association, Sunrise Valley Drive, Reston, Virginia

Professional Memberships:

- 2011-Present Fairfax Education Association, Fairfax, Virginia
- 1995-Present National Art Education Association, Northern Virginia Division, Reston, Virginia

Grants, Honors, and Awards:

- 2011 Student Artwork on Cover, *Reston Connection Newspaper*, Reston, Virginia
- 2010 Student Artwork on Cover, *Reston Connection Newspaper*, Reston, Virginia
- 2008 Student Artwork on Cover, *Reston Connection Newspaper*, Reston, Virginia
- 1993 Dean's List, Longwood College, Farmville, Virginia

Exhibitions:

- 2012 *FCPS* (Fairfax County Public School) *Artist Teacher Exhibition*, Richard J. Ernst Community Cultural Center, Annandale, Virginia
- 2012 *Family Matters*, Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art Thesis Exhibition, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia at The Richard J. Ernst Community Cultural Center, Annandale, Virginia
- 2009 *bookart@artspace*, *An invitational exhibition*, artspace, Richmond, Virginia
- 1993 *Longwood College Art Exhibition*, Bedford Gallery, Farmville, Virginia